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AUTHOR	Hazan, Susan
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ABSTRACT

As Walter Benjamin described in his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", the role of art in society and the notion that art has become modified through mechanical reproduction has engaged not only artists, but also curators and the museum public. Benjamin embraced the severing of the quasi-mystical "aura" from the original as a potentially liberating phenomenon, both for the reproduction of works of art and for the art of film, thereby making works of art widely available, introducing new forms of perception in film and photography and allowing art to move from private to public, from the elite to the masses. While the loss of the aura for Benjamin represented new possibilities, what was forfeited in this process were the "aura" and the authority of the object containing within it the values of cultural heritage and tradition. This paper evaluates the different ways that museums are responding to life on the Internet, and looks to three models of museum Web-sites: the documentation of traditional collections through online databases, the virtual museum with no concrete counterpart to resonate the online experience and the proliferation of Web based contemporary art. This attempt to map out the different ways that museums formulate their identity on the Internet addresses the notion of the lost aura or perhaps the emergence of new cultural phenomena, the virtual aura. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

The Virtual Aura - Is There Space For Enchantment In A Technological World?

Susan Hazan, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

A&MI

Archives & Museum Informatics
2008 Murray Ave.
Suite D
Pittsburgh, PA
15217 USA
info@archimuse.com
www.archimuse.com

Abstract

As Walter Benjamin described in his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", the role of art in society and the notion that art has become modified through mechanical reproduction has engaged not only artists, but also curators and the museum public. Benjamin embraced the severing of the quasi-mystical 'aura' from the original as a potentially liberating phenomenon, both for the reproduction of works of art and for the art of film, thereby making works of art widely available, introducing new forms of perception in film and photography and allowing art to move from private to public, from the elite to the masses. While the loss of the aura for Benjamin represented new possibilities, what was forfeited in this process were the 'aura' and the authority of the object containing within it the values of cultural heritage and tradition. This paper evaluates the different ways that museums are responding to life on the Net, and will look to three models of museum Web-sites: the documentation of traditional collections through online databases, the virtual museum with no concrete counterpart to resonate the online experience and the proliferation of Web based contemporary art. This attempt to map out the different ways that museums formulate their identity on the Net will address the notion of the lost aura or perhaps the emergence of new cultural phenomena, the virtual aura.

Key Words: Walter Benjamin, aura, Michel Foucault, Scott Lash & John Urry, Anthony Giddens, Alfred Gell, magic, enchantment

There are as many reasons to seek out an online museum as there are to visit the real museum, and museum Web sites are addressing a wide range of these experiences. While some Web sites demand that we sit upright in our chairs for a traditional, pedagogical kind of experience, at other times, we are less focused and enjoy a more passive, relaxed kind of interaction with the screen. In much the same way as we may watch a film or a television program in a state of distraction, we act as observer, but an absent-minded one. As we sit in front of the monitor and connect to the dancing images in front of us, we allow electronic images and sounds to radiate from the screen and seep into our inner world. In a post-modern, wired society, the online museum brings the virtual image from remote locations into the foreground. This paper will investigate different models of online museum and the cultural processes involved when objects in the concrete museum are not only represented by surrogates, but also have been liberated or dispelled from their rhizome and distributed in electronic packets to remote locations in a networked world.

This paper evaluates the different ways museums are responding to life on the Net, and will explore three models of museum Web sites. The first model provides a metaphor for the traditional museum which provides access to digital collections through online databases such as the **Thinker ImageBase,** (http://www.thinker.org/) of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (the de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor), USA. In the second model, the virtual museum metaphor is explored in **MUVA, El Pais Virtual Museum of Art** (http://www.diarioelpais.com/muva2/). The El Pais site exemplifies a virtual construction which maintains a tenuous base in reality. For the third model I have selected two further web sites, both net art projects: **"Uncomfortable Proximity" (**http://www.tate.org.uk) at the Tate Modern Web site, and **"Geist"**, (http://www.mediascot.org/geist). Where the 'real' Tate provides floor plans, the Tate Mongrel project, created by Harwood, takes us under the floor of the Tate. The Geist Project, by Colin Andrews of the New Media Group, Scotland, presents an eerie Web site involving ghosts.

This paper will attempt to map out the different ways museums formulate their identities on the Net and will address the notion of the lost aura or perhaps the emergence of a new cultural phenomenon, the virtual aura.

The Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Walter Benjamin, writing against the backdrop of the Nazi era in 1936, in his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", described the role of art in society and the way in which art had become modified through mechanical reproduction. Benjamin embraced the severing of the quasi-mystical 'aura' from the original as a potentially liberating phenomenon. Making works of art widely available opened new forms of perception in film and photography, and the accessibility of art could move from private to public, from the elite to the masses. While at the same time questioning the need for authenticity, Benjamin welcomed the close-ups and slow motion of the moving image in that they opened up new art values that were no longer so dependant on cult values or ritual. Thus Benjamin's work was seminal in bringing into focus the notion of art as politic. This insight, according to Benjamin, meant that

> For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. (Benjamin: 1935, 1992).

What had been forfeited in this process, were the 'aura' and the authority of the object, scarred, yet also embellished with the patina of time and prismatic with the marks of human endeavour. It was the aura that contained within it the values of cultural heritage and tradition. Even though for Benjamin, the loss of the aura meant the loss of the original, the transformation or liberation of the art object to the ordinary represented a gain. For Benjamin, what had then replaced the original at that time was the illusion of the moving image, and the duplication of the photograph. For post-modern society, it has become the digital image. While Benjamin celebrated the magical aura that had been forfeited as a *liberating phenomenon*, one cannot help but speculate whether there is still a need for a space of wonder or enchantment in a technological world. Perhaps society still craves such a space, now more than ever, and seeks it in extraordinary places, such as in the museum. If so, then

can this lost aura be compensated for or reconstituted in any way in a virtual environment in a networked society?

Click to Go!

The speed with which we are able to access remote museums and pull them up side by side on the screen is alarmingly immediate. We do this at the click of a mouse, and in a nano-instant of time. Scott Lash and John Urry, (1994), argue that in the wake of organized capitalism, the flows of objects (goods, capital, money, communications, commodities) as well as subjects (labor, immigrants, tourists) are accelerating in ever widening trajectories. According to Lash and Urry, this has disturbing implications for society. As social relations are 'distanciated', it 'compresses' time and space, and is leading to an emptying out of both subjects and objects. This accelerated mobility causes objects to become disposable and to decline in significance, while social relationships are emptied of meaning (Llash and Urry, 1994). With one click we can access an entire museum. We are able in one glimpse to visualize in miniature all of its multi-functions represented on its home page. While there is no doubt that this provides efficient and meaningful information for remote visitors regarding potential visits, should we query what kind of experience visitors gain when they view the digital collections represented as tiny, two dimensional, electronic reflections of the original works? Should we conclude that this medium is orientated exclusively towards information and interpretation, or could there be more to it?

Anthony Giddens, (1990), argues that in post modern society there has been a separation of time and space, and their recombination in forms which permit precise time-spacing "zoning" of social life, but which has consequently led to the disembedding of social systems (Giddens, 1990). Giddens points to this severing of time as the cause of place becoming increasingly *phantasmagoric* in that locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences that are, in fact, quite distant from them (Giddens, 1990). Giddens emphasizes that,

> What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale but what is present is also the relations concealed in the distance, and it is the remote relations that is determining the nature of the local (Giddens, 1990)

For example, the city with numbered houses based on boulevards and a grid structure, in which the high street has its Benettons, McDonalds, and Nexts, is more abstract, more emptied out than the pre-modern city of winding streets and numberless houses. The remotely accessed database of museum collections seems to offer a similarly disembedded experience. The vast distance covered in mere nano-seconds acts to dissolve the concrete-ness of the real museum in front of our eyes, resulting in an emptying out of the traditional visitor/museum experience and the disembedding of cultural systems reflected in the museum.

Living In-Vitro

In post-modern society, our participation in the public sphere, understanding of current events, entertainment, and life long education have come to depend more and more on mediated resources rather

than first hand, *getting our boots dirty* experience. The second hand, virtual narratives, either through television or digital interaction, cause us not merely to reflect on these experiences but to actively construct our daily lives through them. We cannot be physically present at every national celebration, and we do not want to be present in a war-zone. We are content to let the camera be our eye and the anchorman our mouthpiece. Where much of our life is *lived* through mediated rather than first hand experience, much of our daily interaction is becoming more vitreous than visceral. Over the last 40 years, most of the world's populations have spent countless hours watching the world *in vivo, in vitro* on screens in their living rooms, bedrooms and classrooms. We are content to watch live sporting events from the comfort of an armchair; we receive the daily fix of news on the allotted time slot; and we are faithful voyeurs of other people's lives, some real, some not, playing out on weekly dramas on the screen. Marc Auge reminds us of,

> The false familiarity the small screen establishes between the viewers and the actors of big-scale history, whose profiles become as well known to us as those of soap-opera heroes and international artistic or sporting stars
>
> *(Auge, 1995).*

On the screen, the remote players become miniaturized in our own personal microcosm, and as these tiny, yet familiar images flicker into our internal vistas, they penetrate our lives just as potently as other daily interactions and are often just as persuasive in their messages. How often have we put down a book only to be rudely awakened to the reality that we are sitting in our favorite armchair? How is it that we are shocked by the brutality of the house lights turning on as the last scene of a film fades away from our inner eye? Margaret Morse, (1998), describes this state of distraction as the *fiction effect*; that is, the partial loss of touch with the here and now, a state of distraction experienced on the freeway, in shopping malls, and in television viewing (Morse, 99, 1998). Can digital images and messages be just as compelling as the magic of literary space and cinematic experience? Can the tiny electronic stage, set for one person and for one person only, be a convincing space of enchantment?

Seeking the Sacred Space

According to Michel Foucault, (1964) we live our lives within many kinds of intersecting social relations that overlap yet remain discrete. He argues that while social space has been moving towards de-sacralization since the time of Galileo, this process has been mainly theoretical. Where once there was a hierarchy of sacred and profane spaces, as Foucault describes, "all laden with qualities and haunted by fantasy", in practical terms, both in private and public space, relations are still being controlled by an unspoken sacralization (Foucault, 1964). In order to fulfill this desire for the sacred, contemporary society seeks to define spaces, separate from mundane, everyday living. Foucault describes these spaces as **utopias**, as spaces having no real place, as fundamentally and essentially unreal where they act as an analogy with the real space of society. However, according to Foucault, every civilization creates *real* places, actual places, that serve to stage experiences, and consequently sets them aside for extraordinary action. Despite Benjamin's celebration of the mechanical reproduction that caused the separation of art from cult values and ritual, we cannot deny

that there is still a need for the sacred in post-modern society. The liminal spaces that Foucault calls **heterotopias**, while based in objective reality, act as the mirror that reflects. While this reflected space may be concrete, in that it exists in a real location, its social function at the same time serves to provide society with an abstract locale to act out experiences at a time of crisis; a locale for adolescents, menstruating women, women in labor, old people and so on (Foucault, 1964). A derivation of the heterotopian space, according to Foucault, is the heterochronia of time that accumulates indefinitely - for example, museums and libraries.

> "Museums and libraries are heterotopias in which time never ceases to pile up and perch on its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, and up to the end of the seventeenth century still, museums were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating every-thing, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside time and protected from its erosion, the project of thus organizing a kind of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will nor move - well, in fact, all of this belongs to our modernity (Foucault, 1964).

If we follow Foucault's argument that the museum is already an exceptional space, set aside by society for extraordinary activity, when we view this already fabricated construction remotely through the glass of the television or computer monitor, we surely will encounter a further dislocation. In order to separate technological determination from aesthetic experience, it would be useful to look to Alfred Gell's approach on what it is that makes an artwork compelling in the first place.

Enchanting Technology

In his essay, *'TheTechnology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology'* (1992), Gell attempted to evaluate this mystical yet nebulous trait from a socio-anthropological perspective. He looked to the technological processes of **evolution of the artwork** to ascertain what it was that was inspiring enchantment in the beholder. Gell determined an essential property imbued within the art object that served as a component of social systems. In his search for an overarching anthropological theory to explain not only Western art, but what he terms non-Western art, he implied that art objects cannot be evaluated when dislocated from their social systems, but need to be seen in light of their circulation in society. In this circulatory format, art is thought of as agency, invoking a series of responses or interpretations perceived as indexes of relations to the object, the artist, and the recipient (Gell, 1998, in the foreword by Thomas, ix). Gell does not deny the aesthetic component of art, but considers art as a technical system producing social consequences in much the same way as a religion or belief system weaves the social fabric of a community. This he calls *the technology of enchantment* and proposes that art-systems be considered networks in society where neither the individual creator, nor the agent, nor the *enchanting* art object itself, can be separated from the collective process. This over-arching technical system, contributing to the dynamic of culture, embodies a mystical process that "*casts a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form*".

The technology of an art object differs from other objects valued by society, such as beautiful horses, beautiful people, (Gell: 1992, 43) in that it is *man made,* emerging from the alchemy of the occult technician, and reflects what Gell defines as the *'enchantment of technology.'* The magic, or the aura of the art object, is brought into being through the technological process itself. He illustrated the universal attributes of technology common to all categories of man made art objects, including classical oil paintings, sculptures by Picasso and Matisse, as well as the canoe prow-board of the Trobriande Islands of Papua New Guinea (Gell: 1992, 44). Gell emphasizes the technological process whereby all of these artefacts came into being and suggests that these 'outcomes of the technical process' have all been produced by magical means. It is through this magic that the object evokes a profound sense of awe in the beholder, a potent visceral response that Gell identifies as the 'halo-effect' and Benjamin would connote the aura. But how does the artist/sculptor/carver produce this magical 'halo-effect'? Gell reminds us in discussing J.F. Petos' *Old Time Letter Rack,* 1894, that:

> People have great difficulty in working out how colored pigments (substances with which everybody is broadly familiar) can be applied to a surface so as to become an apparently different set of substances, namely, the ones which enter into the composition of letters, ribbons, drawing pins, stamps, bits of string, and so on (Gell, 1992, 49).

Gell acknowledges that this mystical process does occur, but questions if it is simply a matter of a fascination with colored pigments. As Gell goes on to explain, it is in this process, the way in which the object has come-into-being, which eludes us, and forces us to interpret it as magical (Gell: 1992, 49). Gell compares other technological processes as having *more* or *less prestige* and cites the *lowly button-pressing* of the photographer as having *'no prestige'* unless there is perceived to be virtuosity in the photographic process and sophistically produced image. Only then would the photograph reflect a skill that exists beyond the beholders' capabilities. Gell identifies 'concept' art within his 'interpretive' theory of art, as being more attuned to the realities of the present-day art world which, according to Gell, has long abandoned the making of 'beautiful'-looking pictures and sculptures in favor of 'concept' art. Gell points to Damien Hirst's dead shark, in a tank of formaldehyde, "The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living", 1992, as,

> An object that could not be called appealing, nor a work of any excellence in terms of craftsmanship. But Hirst's shark is a highly intelligible gesture in terms of contemporary art-making and thoroughly grounded in the post-Duchampian tradition of concept art, and, as such, is capable of being evaluated as good art, bad art, middling art, but definitely art of some kind (Ibid. 1996).

Fredric Jameson, (1992), describes conceptual art as "perceptual paradoxes that we cannot think or unravel by way of conscious abstractions and which bring us up short against the visual occasions". Jameson compares conceptual art to some of the classic texts of deconstruction and anchors conceptual art to the spatial relationship of the gallery space. The art form creates a material pretext to make a mental circuit from the institution, into its network of trustees, their affiliations with multiple corporations, and finally the global system of late capitalism proper (Jameson, 1991).

In trying to explain the source of this magical potency, Gell describes how the Trobiande carvers spiritually prepare themselves in order to overcome technical obstacles in the carving process. Only then can this magic be transposed through channels of exchange into the perfect 'performance' of the canoe-board, allowing it to slip effortlessly through the water. Carvers undergo *magical procedures* which open up the channels of their minds, so that both the carved designs and the canoe will flow smoothly. This was accomplished, according to Gell, by means of the metaphoric use of water and other liquids, especially blood and bespelled betel-juice (Gell. 1992). Gell compares this moment to a musician in our culture getting technically prepared to give a perfect performance of an already existing composition, such as the 'Moonlight' Sonata (Gell, 1992). Gell acquiesces to Duchamp's accomplishments, in spite of the banality of the urinal, and recognizes the alchemy of the artist, in that he had the capacity to transform, which Gell describes as

The essential alchemy of art, which is to make what is not out of what is, and to make what is out of what is not (Gell, 1992).

Museumification

The visitor in a museum is responding to cultural processes that are reflected through the trajectories of the aggregated and contextualized objects. These sometimes precious, sometimes mundane objects are modified in the exhibition context where they go through a process of *museumification*, extracted from distant locations and placed on a spotlighted pedestal, or isolated in a glass cage. They become re-conceptualized and re-contextualized and serve to petrify cultural values in much the same way as the theatre projects the human condition through metaphor and allegory. While both the theatre and the heterochronical spaces of a museum are both artificial and temporary projections, the structure of the exhibition relies on 'real', culturally robust objects. Could this wonder resonate in the digital image of the new media? Could there even be such a thing as a virtual aura?

While the exhibition is a discursive space of a mediated message or sets of messages, visitors traditionally expect to encounter the '*real*' object. If visitors come to the museum and find, say, videos, why would they even need to come into the museum in the first place when they could enjoy the work equally well from the comfort of home on private television sets or video players? In a media saturated society we are bombarded with a surfeit of images that have been mechanically reproduced all around us: advertising on the street, art posters in public institutions and art catalogues in school and home. If the museum were to be relied on as a location of culturally robust objects, the exhibiting of videos, electronic interactives, and virtual reality installations would seem to defeat the purpose of the art museum experience.

The history of photography has long left behind the notion of the photograph as historical document, and through aesthetic appreciation it has come to be a theoretical object, no longer perceived merely as a stand-alone simulacrum, eventually attaining a status of its own. This ontological evolution took almost a century and we now recognize the capacity of the photographic image to stir emotions and evoke wonder. Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1981, 2000) affirmed that photographs do radiate a certain kind of 'aura.' The aura of the lost in *me* and of lost memories act in much the same way that Proust's textual reminiscences of the Madeleine pastry and the potency of its smell served to evoke

buried memory. Barthes distinguishes the "*punctum*" as that accident of photographic detail that pricked him, bruised him and was so poignant to him that it evoked an almost transcendental experience, conjuring up poignant lost memories of his mother. The historical process of the photographic image emerged from *window* to artefact, much as video has migrated from documentation tool to art form. Perhaps we need to maintain aesthetic distance from the World Wide Web to distinguish the parameters of this still new medium, in order to identify new spaces of enchantment amongst the cacophony of information.

Culturally robust objects serve as referents to cultural discourses and historical processes, and we are all aware of the many ways they evoke wonder in us. For the majority of society, without the capital to surround themselves with the original, the museum, the zoo, and the botanical garden offer a public space to languish in the authentic. However, with leisure time a limited asset, we depend on the mediated experiences and the surrogate to fill in the gaps. For many years, our reliance on the signifier rather than the signified, the Baudrillard simulacra, a duplicate without an original, has been constantly debated. It has even caused us to take actions in surprising ways that are not based in objective reality. The alarm over the Y2K bug that increased as the new millennium drew closer was an example of the fear of the signifier, a mere numerical representation, rather than of a concrete historical event. According to Kevin Robins,

> The idea that we are already living in a simulation culture has now almost become a cliche. We have actually come to feel rather comfortable with our new condition of derealisation (Robins, 1996).

In order to ascertain if the potency of Gell's enchantment, the Barthes "*punctum*" or the resonance of Benjamin's lost aura can be found online, I will turn to the online projects and investigate how they have made their screen debuts.

Ghosts, Magic and Enchantment

The Thinker ImageBase, from the collections of **The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco** (the de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor), USA, represents the traditional museum metaphor, including activities, visitor information, membership, education activities and online shopping at the museum store. At the same time, the site offers the visitor or surfer access to the digital holdings of the real museums. While the de Young Museum is closed to the public until Spring, 2005, the databases provide authoritative background material both on the exhibitions on display as well as the collections behind the scenes. According to the Web site, the collections belong to the public, and because the museum is able to show less than 5% of the collections in the galleries at any given time, they feel a special responsibility to make them accessible in other ways. The ImageBase is a fully keyword searchable database containing 110,000 images from the collections and is promoted as an expression of the museum's mission to provide meaningful public access to the collections.It behaves more like a resource and less like a repository. The database offers a compelling educational experience, and recalls Andre Malraux's message of universality in his "*Museum Without Walls.*" Just as Malraux predicted and applauded the globalization process that was yet to evolve, both he and Walter Benjamin would undoubtedly have celebrated the

unrestricted distribution of art resources that are now freely bestowed upon remote visitors by such museums over the Internet. While the educational value of such a site is indisputable, in that it effectively replaces the traditional learning tool of slides or exhibition catalogue, I would question the notion of 'meaningful access.' While Web authors invest considerable time and energy in making images speedily accessible through limiting to low resolution and cropping, it is precisely this immediacy of access that makes the process so alarmingly effortless. The speed factor, the 'click to go' phenomenon, may actually act as a disservice to the collections and act as the antithesis of the enchantment of technology, that in fact causes the disembedding of cultural systems.

A museum that does not exist in objective reality and is exclusively constructed electronically on the World Wide Web is the **MUVA, El Pais Virtual Museum of Art**. This museum is a virtual fabrication, and maintains only a tenuous connection to reality. MUVA utilizes a 3D technique, Web2mil, to conjure up a magic environment. Alicia Haber, the Director of the museum, welcomes visitors to the museum, which specializes in contemporary Uraguayan and Latin American art, and hosts extensive collections of paintings by leading Uraguayan artists. Four architects, Jaime Lores, Raul Nazur, Daniel Colominas and Marcelo Mezzottoni, were commissioned to prepare the plans for the building, on Avenida 18 de Julio, the main artery of Uruguay's capital, Montevideo. They created a fine arts museum consisting of galleries for permanent and temporary exhibitions, as well as spaces for informal shows, sculpture garden, restoration workshops, and administrative service areas. The building has five main floors where galleries are open to the public, twenty-four hours a day... virtually that is! Some sixteen graphic and Web designers, programmers, photographers and system managers modeled textures of the walls, stairways, windows, sidewalks, roofs and elevator, pixel by pixel, to provide a sense of 'reality' for the visitors. Intuitive navigation tools, allowing for fluid exploration around the galleries and collections, were studiously hung and discretely lit. Through embedded 'hot-spots' in the paintings, click-able links refer to in-depth studies of the artists' work, biographies and further information on the thematic presentation of the exhibition.

To construct the same museum in concrete, steel and glass would have cost over 100 million dollars, a prohibitive sum for the Uruguayan reality. Due to the efforts of this highly motivated and imaginative team, Uruguay's artists can now show their works collectively, substituting their own virtual museum for that impossible museum. This echoes Gell's comment that the essential alchemy of art is to make what is not out of what is, and to make what is out of what is not. In this case one is not describing an art object, but an entire museum. But we might also be reminded of Lash, Urry and Giddens' dubious implications for society and discern that the virtual metaphor of a museum might be a reflection of the emptying out of subject and object. Even so, while we do recognize a substantial loss, we might also side with Benjamin that, in this loss, there is also a welcome gain. The liberation of the original object and its distribution over the Internet opens up, for the first time, the availability of Uruguayan art for remote visitors and the opportunity for these artists to reach a broader audience.

"Uncomfortable Proximity" is the project created by Harwood, a member of the Mongrel collective with critical texts by Mathew Fuller and commissioned by the Tate. While the 'real' Tate provides floor plans, the Mongrel version takes us to what is beneath the floorboards of the Tate.

The texts and images introduce us to the precarious foundations of the Tate galleries, the Millbank penitentiary, the filth of the Thames and the hidden history of the slave trade. The accrual of wealth through the slave trade had implications for generations of British aristocracy that inevitably translated into the currency of art, some of which found its way into the Tate collections. The Web site may be accessed via the main Tate site, where it kind of sneaks up on you with what appears to be a clone of the specific page you intended to visit on the Tate web-site. The extra windows need no invitation. They unscrupulously appear on your browser in the background as you click your way through the site, and take you into the underbelly of this institution of Britain's national heritage and the decaying matter of the 20th Century. This challenge to the very institution that is partner to the project and acts as host to the scathing message is remarkable in itself. However, what this project does is to limelight the very foundations of the Tate *cathedral*, the circulatory system of art in society, and specifically the sacredness of the British art system. This recalls Gell's observation that art objects cannot be evaluated when dislocated from their social systems but need to be seen in light of their circulation in society, where art, as art agency, the object, the artist, and the recipient, invokes a series of responses or interpretations. The use of this media is resourceful, perniciously using the electronic stage to challenge all that is embedded in the mythological nature of the circulatory art system, and symbiotically located inside of the very fabric of its embodiment, the official Web site.

The Geist Project, by Colin Andrews, of the New Media Group, Scotland, is an eerie Web site involving ghosts, and was exhibited at The Pier Art Centre, Stromness, in November, 2000. Four remote sites across Scottish, traditionally 'haunted locations' are networked and act as nodes, gathering data such as changes in temperature and fluctuations in electromagnetic radiation. The information is then relayed via electronic networks to the library at the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney where it is used to 'feed' an audio installation. The audio is derived from traces of 'voices' recorded at each location. The work is experienced as a four channel audio installation, with each of the four channels representing one of the four remote 'haunted' locations. The audio is derived from traces of 'voices' extracted from recordings made at each location at an earlier time. According to the New Media Scotland Commission, Geist is not about the existence or otherwise of ghosts, but rather about ghost or spectrality as metaphor. It attempts to explore our contemporary condition of omnipresent absence - presence through the use of haunted locations, recorded sound, and network technology. This spine-chilling project reminds us that contemporary communications technologies belong to unseen places - they connect us instantaneously across vast distances yet make our words, impulses and feelings pass through an uninhabited and invisible domain.

> Geist is about being and not being here and there simultaneously. It is about communication through the exchange of electrical energy, about recording and playback, about returns and repetition. It is the domain of specters and spirits, of slippages in time and space and communications across boundaries"
>
> *(From the New Media Scotland Commission electronic promotion).*

The World Wide Web offers many kinds of spaces, and while the traditional museum flows through and into many kinds of cultural

discourses, the art and the artistic processes provide the vehicles of enchantment for society. Artists are beginning to realize the potential of the interconnectivity of the medium and respond to its resonance. Geist is a project that clearly articulates these phenomena. The enchanting technological processes of networked art, firmly embedded in circulatory, social systems, propel sacred spaces from remote locations across vast distances into our foreground at the blink of an eye. We recognize the inextricable link between art and culture, yet we are awed by what we do not fully understand. When we are able to step back and maintain critical distance from these experiences and appreciate the craftsmanship of the new medium, we might even be able to discern the patina of human endeavour and regain in some way the lost aura; the virtual aura.

The next time you sit in front of your computer and crank up the pixels, don't be surprised if you find a poltergeist hanging out there inside your hard disk, dancing across the fiber optic connections, or lurking somewhere out there online, waiting to find you!

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